

## ECOSYSTEM STATUS INDICATORS

### *Marine Mammals*

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## CETACEANS

Wide-scale distribution surveys of large cetaceans have been conducted opportunistically for many years in Alaskan waters, with periodic short-term focus on estimating the abundance of specific populations or species. However dedicated surveys to determine the abundances of all observed cetaceans in Alaskan waters have only recently been made (Moore et al. 2002). Line transect surveys conducted during the summers of 2001-2002 indicated that two of three species of large whales regularly observed throughout the cruises were abundant in some portion of their range within former whaling grounds off coastal waters of the Aleutian Islands (Zerbini et al. 2004). The vicinity of the Aleutian Islands and Alaska Peninsula dominated as major whaling grounds in the North Pacific Ocean. Numerous stocks of large whales were extensively exploited, to the point of depletion, into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century including the North Pacific right whale (*Balaena japonica*), blue (*Balaenoptera musculus*), fin (*Balaenoptera physalus*), sei (*Balaenoptera borealis*), humpback (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), and sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) and to a lesser degree minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*). The recent findings of the two summer surveys conducted by Zerbini et al. (2004) are that humpback whales were abundant in historical whaling grounds north of the eastern Aleutian Islands, and fin whales were abundant in one of the two primary whaling areas: Port Hobron, south of the Alaska Peninsula. Minke whales were abundant during both cruises with concentrations in the eastern Aleutian Islands. Distribution patterns and areas of concentrations of humpbacks, fins, and minkes were similar overall between study years and agreed with distributions reported by other research efforts conducted across the Aleutians during this time (Sinclair et al. submitted). Similar to the findings of other surveys, no sightings of either blue or North Pacific right whales were observed in either cruise, indicating the continued depleted status of these species (Zerbini et al. 2004). However, it is of note that sightings of blue whales have been confirmed in other areas. Observations of blue whales in the Gulf of Alaska were recorded on July 15-16, 2004. Three individuals of this endangered species were seen about 100-150 miles southeast of Prince William Sound. These are the first documented sightings in the Gulf of Alaska in the past three decades. New stock assessments of killer whales are also included in Table 23. Only 2 of those stocks are considered strategic, and neither is known to interact significantly with the Alaskan groundfish fisheries.